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By Paul Ingelow

CHAPTER I—THE HOUR AND THE MAN.

"Hark!"

A tempest of summer rain had been sweeping hill, valley and dale.

Then the sun had come out, bursting from the fleecy clouds like a bright, joyous being bent on a race across blue meadows.

From every tree and bush a million glittering drops of rain hung, swaying, swaying, flashing like pendant diamonds.

And now, from the shelter he had sought among a clump of elders, a man stepped into view, the only human being visible on this grand, attractive panorama of nature.

In low, build and attire he was so completely in harmony with the sun-drenched landscape, that, as he stood surveying its beauties with the eyes of a dreamer, he seemed a sentient part of it.

His gaze was that of a tourist or artist bent on an outing, for which he had selected attire comfortable, appropriate, yet neat.

It fitted his athletic form till the well-built muscles showed swelling and rounded with health and vitality.

The light air encountered a brow broad, intellectual, yet beamed with exposure to the summer sun.

Beneath it flashed eyes poetic, earnest, yet active, subdued to tenderness as they took in the dreamy glories of nature, yet susceptible of expressing vivid emotion when the heart was deeply stirred.

The chin was narrow, yet set, the mouth sympathetic, yet firm, and altogether, the striking combination of tenderness, calculation and purity, method and dreaminess, evinced that their possessor was a remarkable man.

His light tennis shoes showed preparation for tedious tramps, and were worn and dusty. Across his shoulder ran a strap secured to his clothing, and hanging to it, too, was what resembled a small portable photographic camera.

He had paused as he stepped from shelter to enjoy momentarily the glories of hill, field and valley spread before him like a painter's canvas, and to drink in the fresh, cool air, when, with a start, he bent his ear, and a rapid expression on his face, he uttered the quick, involuntary word—

"Hark!"

His eye had before shown the ardor of a true artist in his survey of the sun-drenched landscape, it now glowed with the eager appreciation of a true musician.

For the divine trinity of pure pleasure was completed, golden light, glowing nature, and now seraphic melody.

Birds were singing, but it was not their sweet notes, clear and resonant as silver bells, that struck into a crystal dish, that entranced him.

A near waterfall trickled over the rocks with a swinging murmur of harmony, the soft zephyrs swayed the plumes to the rhythm of Aeolian melody, but these sounds were drowned in a full, glorious burst of magnificent song.

Like one enthralled by the thrill of the most exquisite pleasure, the young man listened entranced.

"Help some soul its strength renew, As the journey we pursue, Oh! the good we all may do, While the days are going by!"

The words rang out clear and ringing, every quivering leaf seemed to vibrate with them—the golden, lute-like notes that pronounced them seemed to be so sympathetic to human well-being that they might be listened to with the same enraptured raptures which, in the consciousness with the noble song that filled air, heart and senses as if thrilled from the lips of a famous diva.

"Is the wood enchanted?"

The stranger asked himself the question in a subdued tone, as if fearful of breaking a spell of magic.

Then, with a sudden start and eager steps, he descended the path leading to a copse, from whence or beyond, which had certainly emanated that full, clear burst of glorious melody.

He penetrated the little belt of timber. The forest growth was nowhere in sight. Approaching in the open, however, he drew back suddenly, awestruck.

The fair one stood revealed. If the song had enchanted the traveler, the simpler, bold heart, interest, and glance under a new spell of witchery.

Where some wild vines, formed a kind of canopy, as if by magic, as if there had taken temporary refuge from the passing shower.

Dreamy influences about her, pure emotions, awakened by the happy voices of nature, her soul had found expression for its thoughts, emotions and aspirations in that song of peace and beauty.

Her face was radiant, her hair flowed to the symmetry of a Niole. Only the eyes, half veiled with dewy sadness, told that she was other than some happy maiden, content to wander forever amid the bounding beauties of field and forest.

What a picture!

The stranger gazed at the words soft and low. If his eyes expressed admiration of the lovely face that order was tempered with the quick, artistic sense that proclaimed him to be a true poet and dreamer.

I must catch that voice—the scene. Its surroundings, to be used on eagerly.

"Nature, beauty, art—if she will only keep that pose for another moment!"

His eyes fixed intently upon her, the stranger drifted slowly the small box from the strap across his shoulder.

As he moved, his camera, covering, reaching so he did so a neat photographic camera, provided with catch, slides, focus adjustments and automatic shutter for ready manipulation.

Looking it against a gnarled, stout vine, he got a perfect focus on the face, the girl and her immediate surroundings.

The last of the case came into view as he tilted it. Across the black surface, in plain white letters, was painted a name—his name—for identification of the camera, in case of loss or theft.

It read—

JERA LE BRITTA.

Photographer.

His finger ready to snap the catch that should open the shutter and time the exposure, the artist started.

With slight excitement he peered at the girl and beyond her, a little gasp of alarm escaped his lips.

For something unexpected had happened, that in later moments of his life he was to realize trivial as it was,

should change the current of many careers and render this most portentous hour in his young destiny.

The hour was a potent one—he was to know that sooner or later, fate had precipitated a strange climax on that smiling landscape, and "the hour and the man" had arrived!

Startled, as has been said, by a somewhat unexpected and remarkable occurrence, the artist was still intent on securing a picture of the fair scene and the fair being who filled it, at all hazards.

His left fingers touched the button of the camera.

Click!

CHAPTER II.—FALCON AND DOVE.

Click!

The work was done! The little shutter lifted, hung suspended for a flashing moment of time, and then shot back into place, holding its precious secret safe on the sensitive plate within the slide.

A stroke of marvelous art had caught the scene in a flash, had chronicled its every outline, and the picture of the fair girl was the reward of the dexterity of the artist.

Something besides, too—the excited artist knew that—and instantly his mind recoiled to the extraordinary and unexpected occurrence that had disturbed him.

For, just as that ominous click sounded a fatal presence had appeared to mar the fair scene.

From the dense shrubbery at the side of the box of vines a human face had come suddenly, startlingly into view.

The artist had seen it, he realized its disturbing effect upon an otherwise placid scene, but, fearful that the young girl gazing at the beautiful landscape might observe it, and change her pose, he shut the shutter at once.

To the intruder, Jera Le Britta now transferred his attention.

There was something sinister in the action of the newcomer. His face was that of a man malignant, hate-filled, venomous.

Dressed like a tramp, there was something in his glittering eyes and handsome though evil face, that proclaimed his goals to be a disguise.

He wore a green, broad shade over one eye, and this disfigured, almost concealed his features.

He had lifted it to bestow one quick, searching glance on the girl, but lowered it instantly afterward.

The girl had not moved. She was all unconscious of the proximity of the artist, the sinister, venomous of the tramp.

The latter, never taking his glance from her face, slowly and cautiously extricated himself from the entrancing vines that formed a barrier between himself and the lower.

The artist drew nearer to the edge of the wood. There was much in the appearance of the intruder that suggested the slithering serpent bent on deceiving and charming the shy, innocent dove. Le Britta's suspicious instincts were aroused, his keenest sense of chivalry, too, and he determined to watch and await the outcome of the scene that held in its very inception all the elements of a strange and weird plot.

What had guided his steps hither? Fate! The girl probably resided in some of the pretty villas that lined the green slope, half a mile distant. The man might be a traveling tramp, but his actions indicated some deep motive in studying the girl ere he approached her.

The artist observed him steal noiselessly toward her. Had the glittering gold bracelet on the girl's arm aroused the cupidity of his thieving instincts? No, a few feet distant from the object of his interest, the tramp came to an abrupt halt.

He had stepped on a dry twig, and its cracking had startled the girl. Rapid as a flash she turned. Quick as lightning the tramp dropped to an attitude of the most abject servility, with bent face and extended hand, assuming the pose and bearing of a professional mendicant.

The girl was startled, more, frightened. She uttered a little cry of alarm, shrank back, gazed wildly about her, as if bent on speeding precipitately from the spot, and then, quivering with timidity and dread, she gazed indifferently.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

The man whined out some unintelligible words. The girl, her hands crossed nervously over her palpitating heart, seemed to strive to regain her composure.

Jera Le Britta, a spellbound spectator of the scene, saw the tramp's shadowed eyes glow from beneath the inopportune mask he wore like those of a basilisk.

"Oh! it is a fine!" murmured the fair maiden in a gentle, pitying tone. "You look poor, hungry, tired. Here, I have not much, but you are welcome to that."

Her face was radiant, her hair flowed to the symmetry of a Niole. Only the eyes, half veiled with dewy sadness, told that she was other than some happy maiden, content to wander forever amid the bounding beauties of field and forest.

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For something unexpected had happened, that in later moments of his life he was to realize trivial as it was,

The girl grew pale. Her eyes told that the man had made a correct conjecture.

"If I am," she faltered, "what is that to you?"

"You shall see. If you are Gladys Vernon, you are the niece of old Gideon Vernon. It's not you I care to know about, I care to know that you have been lucky enough to be adopted as the favorite of that crotchety old miser, but there's some questions about him I'm going to ask, and you're going to answer."

The girl's face had grown steadily whiter. Defiance, fear, played alternately across her colorless features.

Le Britta, about to spring forward and relieve her from the presence and distressing importunities of the insolent intruder, restrained himself, as some intuitive instinct told him that the man's later actions might reveal his motive in thus interrogating her, and afford her friends a clue to be adopted as the favorite of that crotchety old miser, but there's some questions about him I'm going to ask, and you're going to answer."

"First," announced the man, "I want to know if old Vernon is not pretty near used up?"

"My uncle is quite ill," spoke the girl, firmly.

"Good! He'd ought to die!" was the brusque rejoinder. Now then, has he altered his will lately?"

The tramp fairly hissed the words. So intense was his malignity of expression, that Miss Gladys Vernon recoiled with a cry of terror.

"I will not tell you. You are some villain seeking to learn his secrets, to do him harm. Release me! help! help!"

For the villain had seized her white, shapely wrists in his brutal grasp.

"You shall tell me!" he growled, fiercely. "Quick! Has he changed his will? Speak!"

"You soundred, lie there!"

The man who could paint pictures and write poetry, and dream over sunny landscapes, could fight as well.

All the chivalry of his energetic nature aroused, Jera Le Britta had sprung forward.

His good right arm shot out like a piston rod.

His sinewy fist landed squarely between the eyes of the insolent, boor before him.

And the next moment, as the fair young girl clung frantically to the photographer's free arm for support, the tramp, whose will had assailed her, measured his length on the ground at her feet.

CHAPTER III.—A STARTLING RECOGNITION.

Jera Le Britta was a practical man, and had led a prosaic life. That is, only sentiment and a love for the artistic had been the main diversity in his existence from plodding, everyday routine.

The hour for action had arrived, however, and he was not found lacking. A gentleman, a friend to distress wherever found, his heart had responded like magic to the call of beauty unprotected.

The tableau that ensued to his speedy interference in the scene of the girl's distress, was a dramatic one. His fine face aglow with indignation and resolve, he formed a fitting companion for the innocent girl, who trustingly recognized him as a valued protector, and a striking contrast to the enraged and discomfited boor at his feet.

"Leave!" he ordered, making a second advance toward the prostrate ruffian, but Miss Vernon interposed a restraining hand.

"You have punished him enough," she faltered, tremblingly. "Let him depart in peace!"

"Peace!" shouted the tramp, struggling to his feet and snarling frightfully. "I'll show you, my haughty lady. You, too, you insolent interferer. I'll—"

"Go, if you are wise!" ordered Le Britta, warningly.

With a malevolent, sowl, the subdued, knave shrank from the spot, and, as he departed, he muttered, "You are safe now. Do not trouble me, you are safe now."

spoke the photographer to his companion.

"He frightened me!" quavered the girl, apprehensively. "He hinted at such dreadful things about uncle! He has threatened even you!"

Le Britta smiled confidently.

"He will do his worst to keep out of my path in the future," he said. "And now, Miss Vernon—"

"What? You know my name?" said the girl, with surprise.

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